

DOCUMENT RESUME

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[Mandatory Participation in the Department of Defense Self-Help Program Can Reduce Operation and Maintenance Costs]. CED-78-26; B-333102. January 13, 1978. 5 pp.

Report to Secretary, Department of Defense; by Henry Eschwege, Director, Community and Economic Development Div.

Issue Area: Domestic Housing and Community Development (2100).
Contact: Community and Economic Development Div.

Budget Function: National Defense: Department of Defense - Military (except procurement & contracts) (05).

Organization Concerned: Department of the Navy; Department of the Army; Department of the Air Force.

Congressional Relevance: House Committee on Armed Services; Senate Committee on Armed Services.

Authority: P.L. 95-82. DOD Instruction 4270.21.

A survey of the Department of Defense's (DOD's) family housing operation and maintenance program indicated that DOD's housing maintenance costs could be reduced. Findings/Conclusions: Significant savings could be achieved if participation in self-help programs were required. A significant amount of family housing maintenance and repair work, which, according to DOD and service regulations should be performed by the occupants, is being performed by installation maintenance personnel. Five installations visited incurred unnecessary maintenance costs of more than \$291,000 for work the occupants should have done. Family housing occupants who prefer not to perform self-help work should be charged for work done by maintenance personnel. Occupants are not charged for damages to housing units. Recommendations: The Secretary of Defense should instruct the services to strengthen their self-help programs by enforcing the requirement that family housing occupants do elementary maintenance and repair tasks; and requiring occupants who refuse to do elementary tasks to pay for the cost of the work done by maintenance personnel. DOD should instruct the services to implement new instructions authorizing military installation commanders to assess and collect charges for family housing damages without having to prove gross negligence. (RBS)



UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT DIVISION

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B-133102

JAN 13 1978

The Honorable
The Secretary of Defense

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We have completed our survey of the family housing operation and maintenance program. A substantial portion of our work dealt with the feasibility of individually metering Department of Defense (DOD) family housing units and charging occupants for utilities used. As you know, Public Law 95-82, dated August 1, 1977, authorized DOD, after an appropriate test, to meter its family housing units and charge occupants for excessive use of utilities.

One of the larger users of utilities, your Department is one of the spiraling increases in utility costs as well as being needed for reducing energy consumption. It is essential, therefore, that the Department meet the test milestone set forth in the conference report to Public Law

Since Public Law 95-82 deals with the issue of metering on-base housing, we have discontinued further work on our survey. However, we want to bring to your attention work we did at Fort Bragg, Camp Lejeune, and Seymour-Johnson Air Force Base, North Carolina, and Norfolk Naval Complex, Little Creek Naval Amphibious Base, and Langley Air Force Base, Virginia, which indicated that DOD could reduce its maintenance costs if

- the military services require that occupants participate in DOD's family housing self-help program;
- family housing occupants, who preferred not to do self-help work, were charged for the work performed by base maintenance personnel; and
- occupants were charged for damages resulting from their carelessness, abuse, or negligence.

CED-78-26
(38302)

SIGNIFICANT SAVINGS COULD BE
ACHIEVED IF PARTICIPATION IN
SELF-HELP PROGRAMS WERE REQUIRED

The military services are not making participation in DOD's self-help programs a mandatory requirement. Therefore, a significant amount of family housing maintenance and repair work, which, according to DOD and service regulations, should be performed by the occupants, is being performed by installation maintenance personnel. At the five installations maintenance personnel did more than \$291,000 of self-help work, during a 6 to 12 month period. ^{1/} Additionally, maintenance personnel are performing self help work while the units are vacant that occupants should have done before vacating their quarters.

DOD Instruction 4270.21 specifies that family housing occupants are responsible for such routine maintenance, minor repair, operation, housekeeping, and related servicing of the assigned dwelling unit, Government-owned equipment and furnishing, and maintenance of grounds as would be expected of a tenant in private housing of similar type and value.

Each installation we visited had established occupant self-help programs of varying kinds. Each installation as a minimum, distributed a brochure to new occupants which listed occupant responsibilities. Examples of items on the lists included unstopping sinks and drains, repairing window and door screens, replacing broken switch plates and outlet covers, tightening hinges and door catches, and replacing clothes line wire. Further, each of the installations visited operated a store where occupants could obtain materials and tools at no cost.

Despite these actions, we observed little enforcement of the programs. We estimate that five installations incurred unnecessary maintenance expenses of more than \$291,000 for self-help work which occupants should have done. (See enclosure I). Our estimate is based on the amount of self-help

^{1/} Because of differences in recordkeeping procedures, we were not able to obtain data for comparable periods at all installations. The enclosure to this report shows the time period we used at each installation.

work done by maintenance personnel in a sample number of housing units. Using self-help brochures distributed to family housing occupants, we identified work items classified as self-help. We then statistically selected and examined 1,019 housing maintenance files. At two installations, maintenance personnel made at least one self-help call during 1976 at an average of 71 percent of the units in the sample. At the three remaining installations an average of 53 percent of the units sampled had at least one self-help repair during a 6- to 7-month period of fiscal year 1977. Many of the units sampled received several calls for self-help items. For example, maintenance personnel made an average of three self-help repairs per unit in 88 housing units at the Little Creek Naval Amphibious Base, Virginia.

In addition, self-help items which occupants should do before vacating quarters are accomplished by maintenance personnel after the units are vacated. At Langley Air Force Base maintenance personnel spent more than 1,280 labor hours during the first 6 months of 1977 doing self-help items which occupants should have done before vacating their quarters. The self-help items were identified during routine housing inspections several days or weeks in advance of the time the occupants vacated their quarters. Notwithstanding, the occupants were not required to do the self-help work.

DOD could effect greater savings in maintenance costs if occupants, who preferred not to do the self-help work, were charged for the work performed by maintenance personnel. Housing officials said that some occupants when advised that their request was a self-help item insisted that maintenance personnel do the work and, therefore, the housing officers had no choice except to request that the work be done. If the program, however, contained an option of either (1) making the materials and tools available, or (2) charging the occupants when maintenance personnel did the work, the program may be more effective in reducing DOD's family housing maintenance costs.

OCCUPANTS ARE NOT CHARGED/
FOR DAMAGES TO HOUSING UNITS

Some family housing maintenance and repair projects result from occupant carelessness, abuse, or negligence. The total cost of the repairs could not be determined because the

records only show the cost of work where occupants voluntarily assumed liability for damages. Otherwise, the repairs were made and recorded as a routine maintenance expense.

We believe that housing officials do not emphasize the collection for damages caused by carelessness, abuse, or negligence because the Departments of the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force instructions require that gross negligence must be demonstrated before an occupant can be held liable for damages. Officials said that in some situations it would cost more to support a case for gross negligence than it would cost to have base maintenance personnel repair or replace the item.

Individually the cost of some of the repairs are insignificant; but, others are not. At Langley Air Force Base, during the first 6 months of 1977, housing inspectors identified 91 deficiencies which we believe were caused by carelessness, abuse, or negligence, such as broken or missing medicine cabinet mirrors, light globes, window panes, refrigerator shelves and ice trays; broken commode tops; and holes in walls. Because of the large number of seemingly insignificant items, the tendency is for housing officials to overlook the serious damages (such as holes in walls, and broken commode tops), and become reluctant to assess the occupant for repair costs because of the requirement to prove gross negligence first.

We believe DOD should require that military families living in Government-owned housing be (1) responsible for damages caused by carelessness, abuse, or negligence without proving gross negligence and (2) charged for repairs or replacement of damaged or missing items. This policy would reduce DOD's family housing maintenance costs without taking unfair advantage of housing occupants.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend that the Secretary of Defense instruct the services to strengthen their self-help programs by:

- enforcing the requirement that family housing occupants do elementary maintenance and repair tasks; and
- requiring occupants who refuse to do elementary work tasks to pay for the cost of the work done by installation maintenance personnel.

We recommend also that DOD instruct the military services to implement new instructions authorizing military installation commanders to assess and collect charges for family housing damages without having to prove gross negligence.

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Section 236 of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 requires the heads of Federal agencies to submit a written statement of actions taken on our recommendations to the House Committee on Government Operations and the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs not later than 60 days after the date of the report and to the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations with the agency's first request for appropriations made more than 60 days after the date of the report.

Copies of this report are being sent to the House Committees on Appropriations, Government Operations, and Armed Services; the Senate Committees on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Defense, Governmental Affairs, and Armed Services; the Acting Director, Office of Management and Budget; and the Secretaries of the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force.

We would appreciate being advised of any actions taken on our recommendations and other matters discussed in this letter.

Sincerely yours,



Henry Eschwege
Director

Enclosure